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ABSTRACT

Large gaps exist in our knowledge of the process of communication, and the second language teaching profession should focus on closing the gaps in understanding that are significant for the second-language user. Major issues requiring further empirical or other investigation include: the current levels of communicative skills among second- and foreign-language learners, and ways of measuring them; determining interim communication skill levels for language learners; creating latent communicative competence in individuals; facilitating communicative behavior, for example by the acquisition of a much larger vocabulary than is now felt necesaary; the relative impact on the individual's communication skills of different communicative deficiencies; the choice of learning activities for developing desired communication skills; the advisability of teaching skills to bypass rather than overcome communicative deficiencies; the advisability of focusing students' attention on higher-level communication skills and giving less attention to lower-level skills; the need for training students in inferential skills; and implications for the role and professionalism of the teacher drawn from our understanding of the communication process. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATION PROCESSES: WHAT DO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS NEED TO BE ABLE TO DO?

David Wilkins

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5. Communication processes: what do second language learners need to be able to do?

David Wilkins

Introduction

This paper is devoted largely to an informal account of the process of communication. It is informal because, unfortunately, communication theorists, sociologists, psycholinguists, discourse analysts and others do not take the same view of what communication processes actually are. There is no authoritative account to be taken off the shelf. It is drawn from a variety of sources: psycholinguistic accounts of sentence production and reading, models of language constructed by linguistic theorists, studies of interpersonal language behaviour and investigations of the role of pragmatics in communication. The account is broadly psycholinguistic in the sense that whatever is done in behaviour is assumed to originate in mental activities in which the factors described have played a role. No attempt is made to describe the temporal, sequential or causal relations among these factors, nor could such an attempt be made. The mental activities are loosely referred to as processes, but the term is used atheoretically and here includes what might elsewhere be referred to as plans and strategies. It is assumed that the term communication applies not only to face-to-face spoken interaction but also to such activities as reading and listening.

Production and comprehension

We can begin our attempt to describe the process of communication by giving a partial account of the operations involved in speech production. We will assume that conversational use of language is involved. An act of speech must begin from the existence of some kind of intention on the part of the speaker. That intention may be to perform one or more speech acts designed to have an impact on the person addressed. Most speech acts also demand the expression of one or more propositions. Planning the speech act involves deciding (though rarely consciously) both what is to be said (and done) and how it is to be said. While the planning logically precedes the execution, the two are rarely distinguishable as distinct stages and indeed the exact relation between them is not clear. It is likely that the utterance is begun before all of the content has been decided. Certainly the form of the utterance is unlikely to have been fully determined. Both the content and the form depend upon the speaker's appreciation of the situation and this may be subject to constant adjustment even as the utterance proceeds. This adjustment

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will be made in the light of the feedback provided both by the speaker's continuing monitoring of his own performance and by his perception of the interlocutor's reactions. With regard to the content, the appropriateness of the speech act to the relationship with the interlocutor (or indeed as a suitable response to a speech act performed by the interlocutor previously) must be judged. The speaker must assess what presuppositions are shared with the hearer, what knowledge, values, beliefs can be taken for granted. Similarly, where situational factors are relevant, the speaker must judge how far the relevance to the message of such factors is self-evident. Broadly he has to determine how much of what he wishes to be communicated has to be made explicit and how much may be left unsaid. In deciding this he will know that a certain degree of redundancy may help communication, but that otherwise economy, brevity and simplicity may render what he has to say more accessible. His sensitivity to the situation will tell him whether, in selecting forms, there are important contextual variables to take into account. What is his social relationship with the person addressed? Is the situation formal or informal? What degree of politeness should be attained? Are there linguistic conventions to be observed given the topic or domain of the language use? Does the fact that this is a spoken rather than a written interaction require that syntactic and lexical forms be chosen accordingly?

This brings us to the question of the form that the utterance will take. It is to be presumed that selection or at least consideration of the lexical forms takes place relatively early, since these are the major units of the meaning to be expressed. However there is no one sentence form to express a given content, so that considerable choice is available in how the relations between the lexical items may be conveyed. Once again many considerations operate, though again rarely consciously. The utterance form (simplistically we will assume that sentences are the units of informal speech) will not be occurring in either linguistic or contextual isolation. The relation with previous utterances will demand the use of anaphoric devices and may permit considerable ellipsis. Semantic relators may be used to make explicit the semantic relations within the text. Even lexical choice may be affected by the previously used lexical items. Ways of referring to the physical context may be needed on occasions. Given the content, the speaker has the choice of marking the illocutionary force of the utterance directly or of achieving the same effect indirectly. The utterance will need to show continuity with the topic of preceding utterances. At the same time the speaker will want to adopt an arrangement for the sentence and a distribution of intonation features which will give prominence to what is intended to receive greatest emphasis in what he has to say. It is unlikely that, other than for the shortest sentences, the entire sentence form is selected initially. Sentence structure is hierarchical; structures are embedded within other structures. The syntactic form of a complex message is probably built up phrasal unit by

phrasal unit. Within such units semantic and grammatical choices must be made affecting the form of individual words. Deictic factors will help determine decisions on tense and article choice. The semantics of the sentence will determine, say, the choice of modal verb. Syntactic relations may demand marking for concord or agreement. At this point the appropriate morphological forms must be selected. What is the correct case form for a noun which is subject of the sentence? What is the past tense form of the selected verb? Finally the phonological shape must be given to the words and this in turn can be interpreted phonetically and the appropriate messages sent to the speech organs for the utterance actually to be articulated.

The process is staggering in its complexity. We are many years away from even the most elementary understanding of the 'decisions' that have to be taken and the temporal and other relations between them. What is astonishing is that the speech act is performed with spontaneity and with effective synchronisation of all the decisions being made at the different levels. Conscious attention is rarely given to any but the higher level skills involved.

It might be supposed that the receiver's processes are a simple reversal of the productive processes. This is not the case in two important respects. First, neither the listener nor the reader is dependent on a strict decoding process. There is evidence that the listener does not first identify individual phonemes, then their combination into syllables, then identify the morphemes formed by syllables and so on up the grammatical hierarchy. The hearer has the competence to do this, but it is a set of procedures which is usually short-cut. The hearer has a great deal of relevant knowledge which enables him to make predictions at any point in the speaker's utterance, either exactly or within a limited range of probabilities, how the utterance will continue. His syntactic competence, given the linear character of speech, contributes significantly to this. Certain forms are so highly predictable as to be virtually redundant. However, the hearer also brings to bear a great deal that is non-linguistic. The very topic increases the likelihood of certain (lexical) forms occurring. The hearer has an enormous store of knowledge which may assist his predictions. There may be features of the physical context which are relevant to the content of the speech. The speaker and the hearer share experience and presuppositions. There may be discourse patterns which constrain the range of things which may occur. In other words, there are many information sources available to the hearer, such that in the communication situation overall there is a great deal of redundancy. The hearer's short-cut is to be constantly building up expectations in the light of this information and to scan rather than decode the utterance so as to retrieve just enough information from the form of the utterance to confirm or correct the prediction. The redundancy in the situation means that fully accurate perception of the signal is not essential for communication.

Mention of the diverse information sources (frames) available to the hearer brings us to the second way in which reception and production differ. The message which is transmitted from speaker to listener is not in practice a well-defined entity. That is to say, what is transmitted is not like a parcel which the receiver has simply to unwrap in order to gain access to the set of meanings which the speaker put into the parcel in the first place. The hearer has to interpret the speaker's intentions and relate these to his own perceptions and frames of reference. In practice the speaker's intentions operate at an indeterminate number of levels. We may think that at least the meaning conveyed by the lexical and syntactic features of a sentence is understood by a simple process of linguistic decoding, but even here contextual information may be necessary to resolve ambiguities or imprecisions. Much else that the speaker expects to convey is recoverable only through inferencing processes. The illocutionary force of an utterance has usually to be established in this way. What is more, it seems that an utterance may commonly have several different, compatible illocutionary forces at the same time. Further, the utterance may be performed with an ill-defined phatic purpose or may be intended simultaneously to communicate attitudes, values or psychological states. This means that there is no finite 'meaning' to be grasped by the receiver. What the hearer must do is relate the utterance to a frame of reference which is judged to be that which has been presupposed by the speaker. What is understood must match the speaker's intentions to a significant degree, otherwise communication will not have taken place successfully. But some difference of interpretation is inevitable and, perhaps, legitimate. The hearer may not attach the same significance to what the speaker has said as the speaker himself. It is not incorporated into his frame of reference in the same way. Where the language event is of a highly interactive kind, there is the possibility of continual verification so as to ensure that serious miscomprehension is avoided.

Second language

The processes that have been sketched assume the participants to be fully competent speakers of the language. The characteristic of individuals using a second language is that they do not fully possess that competence. Second language users are likely to bring to the act of communication intentions which are not radically different from those of the native speaker and a familiarity with the role of pragmatic factors in communication which derives from their first language competence. In all other respects they are likely to be significantly different from the native speaker. First, their lexical and syntactic competence will be markedly more restricted. Secondly, they are unlikely to have the perception and judgement of social situations and relations to recognise the social appropriateness of different forms of language behaviour. Thirdly, the absence of shared cultural experience with native speakers means that they

will be operating with different frames of reference. All of these deficiencies may lead to breakdown in communicative behaviour. While incomplete command of the language system will lead to use of interlanguage forms, many of the resulting formal deviations from native language use may not be insuperable obstacles to communication. Lexical deficiency and lack of capacity for syntactic elaboration will impose a far more serious restriction on the communicative repertoire. Unfamiliarity with social norms will lead to sociolinguistic solecisms, which may not have significant material effect on communication. The lack of suitable frames of reference will handicap the individual's interpretive skill and lead to misunderstanding and confusion in deducing what is meant from what is said. The effect of these deficiencies upon communicative capacity will vary according to the nature of the language activity. The restricted syntactic range will seriously limit the speaker's expressive capacity. The speaker will find that he cannot say what he would like to say. On the other hand it will have a less serious impact upon his reading skill because, as we have seen, accurate linguistic decoding can to some extent be by-passed in receptive activities. In this sense reading can be expected to become a communicatively useful skill far more rapidly than, say, speaking. To balance this it should be said that the deficiencies in cultural experience are likely to have their most serious effect on listening and reading, particularly in instances where interpretation is heavily dependent on the receiver's knowledge.

It is plausible to assume that the individual's own perception of the source of his communicative difficulties will focus primarily on the inadequacy of his syntactic and lexical competence. How far and by what means he has coped with these difficulties will be revealed by his communicative behaviour. Broadly speaking, first, he may adjust the nature of the message. The message may be changed or reduced to meet the linguistic resources available. If this is not feasible a message begun might have to be abandoned or a topic avoided altogether. In contrast to these solutions he may try and remedy the deficiency in the resources available while maintaining the intention to communicate the message in full. This could be achieved by such devices as borrowing from the first language, code switching, word-coinage or even the use of non-linguistic resources. Even so, breakdown in communication, which occurs even in native-speaker interaction, must be anticipated with some frequency where a second-language speaker is involved. Being able to handle repair of breakdown may prove to be an important ability in a non-native speaker. A native speaker engaged in an interaction with a non-native speaker will be expected to assist in the repair and indeed to adjust his language behaviour to accommodate the non-native interlocutor whether or not this goes as far as the use of foreigner-talk.

Issues

Even a more elaborate account of communication processes than has been provided above would reveal a large number of gaps in our knowledge. If we hold that in the long term it would be the aim of an educational policy for languages to bring the communicative skills as close as possible to those described, then we need to fill those gaps in our understanding that are particularly significant for a second-language user. Our knowledge of communication processes will then enable us to set reasonable aims which in turn will have important implications for the teaching and learning process. Suggestions are made in the remainder of the paper regarding major issues which demand further investigation by means of empirical or other forms of research.

1. There is an almost total lack of accurate information about the current levels of communicative skill among learners of second or foreign languages. There is need for a substantial programme of descriptive studies to remedy this deficiency.

   1a. As a corollary to this, we also need to develop adequate tools for describing or measuring communicative skills.

2. The processes outlined above are those that characterise the mature and competent speaker. The learner exposed to the language within an educational institution cannot be expected to reach that level of skill. Is it possible to establish interim targets and in what terms could they be defined?

   2a. This gives rise to a number of subsidiary questions. Would it be a legitimate solution to devote learning wholly to mastery of the language system so as to create a latent competence that could be made communicative if suitable conditions occurred at a future date?

   2b. Alternatively, would it be best to achieve a realistic limitation of aims by seeking to meet only a restricted set of communicative needs even if this left gaps in the linguistic competence?

   2c. Are there specific changes in priorities that could be adopted to facilitate communicative behaviour, such as the acquisition of a far more substantial vocabulary than is commonly the case?

3. What is the relative impact of the different kinds of deficiency mentioned on the communicative effectiveness of the individual?

   3a. Is it possible to quantify the impact of different types of error or their combination on comprehension?

3b. What types and quantities of phonological error have serious effects on intelligibility?

4. Does the description or analysis of communicative processes have immediate implications for teaching and learning? In particular, should activities intended to promote learning mirror the ultimate target skills? For example, do the processes followed by a highly skilled reader provide evidence against teaching reading by breaking it down into what are supposedly component skills?

5. Will the communicative competence of second language learners be improved if they are taught strategies to overcome or by-pass their difficulties? Is there a case for practising paraphrase, interlingual or intralingual transfer, word-coinage and so on? Are there devices for improving repair? Should learners be shown how to gain specific forms of linguistic assistance from an interlocutor?

6. Should language teaching set out to draw the learner's attention away from the lower-level language skills (where errors may have little impact on communication and where they may disappear of their own accord given sufficient opportunity for use of the language), so as to concentrate their attention on higher-level planning? Is automation of those skills better ensured by intensive attention to them or distraction from them?

7. Is it possible or necessary to train second language learners in inferencing skills?

8. What implications are there for the role and professionalism of the language teacher in our understanding of the nature of communication?

8a. Is the teacher's traditional preoccupation with the language system still valid, albeit extended to incorporate such features as discourse patterns, sociolinguistic variation and illocution?

8b. Should the teacher become a skilled animator of communicative activities providing opportunities for integrated use of language?

8c. Is it the language teacher's role to provide the experience and knowledge of the second language culture which enables the learner to acquire relevant frames of reference?